

**MINUTES
of the
FIFTH MEETING
of the
MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

**October 23, 2015
Clovis Civic Center
Clovis**

The fifth meeting of the Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee was called to order by Representative Bob Wooley, co-chair, on October 23, 2015 at 9:10 a.m. in the Clovis Civic Center in Clovis.

Present

Sen. Richard C. Martinez, Co-Chair
Rep. Bob Wooley, Co-Chair
Rep. George Dodge, Jr.

Absent

Rep. Eliseo Lee Alcon
Sen. Craig W. Brandt
Sen. William F. Burt
Rep. Dianne Miller Hamilton
Sen. Daniel A. Ivey-Soto

Advisory Members

Rep. Randal S. Crowder
Rep. Jim Dines
Sen. John Pinto
Rep. John L. Zimmerman

Rep. David E. Adkins
Rep. Cathrynn N. Brown
Sen. Carlos R. Cisneros
Rep. Rick Little
Sen. Michael Padilla
Sen. William H. Payne
Sen. William E. Sharer
Rep. Jim R. Trujillo

Guest Legislators

Rep. Dennis J. Roch
Sen. Pat Woods

Staff

Jeret Fleetwood, Researcher, Legislative Council Service (LCS)
Peter Kovnat, Staff Attorney, LCS
Kathleen Dexter, Researcher, LCS

Guests

The guest list is in the meeting file.

Handouts

Copies of all handouts and other written testimony are in the meeting file.

Friday, October 23

Welcome

David Lansford, mayor, City of Clovis, welcomed the committee and described Clovis as not only an agricultural center but also a military community, with close ties to neighboring Cannon Air Force Base.

Veterans' Services Department Update

Brigadier General Jack R. Fox, secretary, Veterans' Services Department (VSD), gave an update on initiatives within the VSD that address veterans' health and transportation issues. Current initiatives include:

- (1) a "veterans' network of care portal", which is an online service directory created in partnership with the Interagency Behavioral Health Purchasing Collaborative to provide information on health, employment and housing benefits and services for veterans;
- (2) the women veterans initiative, which found in a recent survey that nearly 70 percent of female veteran respondents were not aware that they qualify for federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits, while an equal percentage stated that they have mental health concerns;
- (3) the federally funded Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot Program, which is now fully operational and has regional offices in Las Vegas, Shiprock, Roswell, Silver City and Albuquerque to coordinate outreach and education for veterans in rural areas;
- (4) the relocation and grand opening of a field office in Roswell, as well as a new office to open in Gallup before the end of the year; and
- (5) a groundbreaking, scheduled for Veterans Day, for the new state veterans cemetery in Fort Stanton.

Lack of transportation to VA health services continues to be the top complaint received by the VSD. In response, the department is working with the Department of Transportation, the Mid-Region Council of Governments and the VA hospital in Albuquerque to create a statewide transportation network using five vans funded by the VA and using paid drivers, in contrast to transportation provided by veterans' service organizations, which rely on volunteer drivers. The network will have a centralized call center that will coordinate transportation services.

Secretary Fox reported that the VSD budget request for fiscal year 2017 includes an increase to cover additional staff, including a licensed social worker for the department.

On questioning, Secretary Fox and committee members noted that:

- (1) the network of care portal will direct inquiries to providers as well as to the veteran service officer in the VSD's regional office closest to the veteran who needs services;
- (2) the VSD continues to hold Stand Down events to identify homeless veterans and connect them with available services;

(3) while the Veterans Integration Center in Albuquerque requires that an incoming resident be drug- and alcohol-free for 30 days prior to admission, there are temporary housing programs, such as one through Goodwill Industries of New Mexico (Goodwill), that do not have this entry requirement;

(4) VSD staff at its regional offices are directed to spend four days per week in the field doing outreach in rural areas;

(5) the VA's Veterans Choice Program does not currently have an expiration date, though there are rumors that the program may be discontinued;

(6) the five vans in the veterans transportation initiative will be based in Deming, Las Vegas, Gallup, the East Mountain area of Bernalillo County and Roswell, though the Roswell van may be moved to another area;

(7) the VA has established a van in the Clayton area for veterans who receive health care services at the VA facility in Amarillo, Texas, and is considering a van for veterans there who receive services in Albuquerque; and

(8) VA outreach programs aim to identify veterans from all eras who are not receiving services, not just the post-9/11 veterans; many of these unserved veterans are women who are less likely than men to identify as veterans.

Veterans Treatment Court Program

Ginger Varcoe, veterans court coordinator, Second Judicial District Court; Christina Argyres, veterans court judge, Second Judicial District Court; Camilla Lopez, director, Veterans Justice Outreach, VSD; and Mr. Radar, service dog in training, gave a presentation on the veterans treatment court, a pre-sentence treatment program available to certain veterans in the criminal justice system as an alternative to incarceration.

Participation in the treatment program is voluntary, and eligibility is restricted to veterans with either substance abuse or mental health issues whose criminal history does not include certain violent crimes, such as sex offenses or crimes against children. Participants are paired with veterans who have already completed the program, and these mentors guide the participants through an 18-month regimen of treatment, court appearances, progress assessments and community support meetings. A recent addition to the participants' range of treatment options is the Warrior Canine Connection, a six-month program in which participants train service dogs to assist veterans suffering from service-connected disabilities and mental health issues.

Two courts in Bernalillo County participate in the treatment program, as well as one magistrate court in Valencia County. Valencia County also has a "veterans track" in its drug court, and the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Court has a veterans track for domestic violence first-time offenders. Court personnel in Eddy County have undergone training to set up a veterans treatment court but have not yet launched the program, and the Mescalero Apache Tribe has applied for training to establish a program.

On questioning, the presenters and committee members noted that:

(1) the veterans treatment court program needs funding for additional staff, though perhaps not for more judges; funding for the program does not come from the Administrative Office of the Courts but, rather, from the Behavioral Health Services Division of the Human Services Department;

(2) participants are tracked for three years after graduating to monitor recidivism and to follow through with VA treatment;

(3) a participant who relapses while enrolled in the program is subject to sanctions, such as community service; and

(4) the New Mexico Supreme Court is in favor of the program but has not yet officially recognized it as a treatment court.

Military Spouse Employment Opportunities

Anna Blanche Rabe, Military Spouse J.D. Network, gave a presentation on the obstacles faced by military spouses living in New Mexico when trying to obtain employment within their professions.

Because military families move often, military spouses have a difficult time building careers. Across professions, military spouses have a 26 percent unemployment rate and a 90 percent underemployment rate, due in large part to states' failure to recognize out-of-state licensure. In 2013, New Mexico enacted provisions to expedite professional licensure for military spouses licensed in other states; however, the law does not cover those who are licensed in other countries, nor does it prevent imposition of requirements that military spouses cannot meet, such as preliminary supervised practice for a period that might exceed the time a military family is stationed in-state.

A spouse's ability to find work can affect a servicemember's preference for assignment location. Ms. Rabe reported that, in her experience, New Mexico assignments rank low among military families on this point. She urged the committee to consider statutory changes to improve the situation for all military spouses and to support a proposed State Bar of New Mexico rule change to help attorney military spouses.

On questioning, Ms. Rabe and committee members noted that:

(1) the proposed rule change for bar admission in New Mexico would not lower standards set at either the state or national level;

(2) New Mexico's current reciprocity program for attorney licensure requires four years of practice in a New Mexico jurisdiction prior to receiving reciprocity, which is longer than many military families reside in the state; and

(3) in contrast to military families' anecdotal reluctance to be stationed in New Mexico, Cannon Air Force Base has been ranked as one of the U.S. Air Force's top-10 facilities, and the area includes many retired military servicemembers.

VA Health Care in New Mexico Update

Andrew Welch, director, New Mexico VA Health Care System, gave an overview of the VA system in New Mexico and an update on issues that the committee discussed at prior meetings.

New Mexico's VA system, based in Albuquerque, serves 60,000 veterans in New Mexico and southern Colorado. This represents nearly 40 percent of the veterans living in the area, with an estimated 60 percent of veterans projected to receive health care through the system by 2025. The level of care required by that time is also projected to increase as the veteran population ages. The VA has an extensive telehealth system aimed at improving health care access for veterans in rural areas. It also partners with various public and private entities, including the VSD, the University of New Mexico, the Indian Health Service, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and veterans' service organizations, to ensure that veterans fully access their VA benefits. VA research programs in posttraumatic stress disorder, women's health and cancer have resulted in treatment improvements that benefit not only veterans but also patients in the general health care system.

The Veterans Choice Program has proven to be a challenge for the VA. Veterans with choice cards are authorized to receive certain health care services at non-VA facilities due to scheduling delays or distance issues. As initially implemented, veterans who live more than 40 miles "as the crow flies" from a VA facility could be treated at non-VA facilities, but this requirement did not reflect the terrain and road conditions in New Mexico and has now been revised to 40 "road miles". Some veterans are eligible for travel reimbursement through the VA Travel Pay program, which issued \$10 million in travel reimbursements last year to veterans receiving care at the Albuquerque VA hospital.

Under the VA's newly reorganized structure, the New Mexico VA system is now combined with the VA's western group of facilities. Veterans in the Clovis, Hobbs and Las Cruces areas, however, will continue to receive care at VA facilities in Texas.

On questioning, Mr. Welch clarified that:

(1) primary care and telehealth mental health care are available at the VA's community-based outpatient clinics around the state, but specialty care is provided at the Albuquerque VA hospital;

(2) 93 percent of VA appointments are scheduled within 30 days of a veteran's desired appointment date; many of the delayed appointments are concentrated in eye care and mental health care due to a shortage of providers; and

(3) veterans who have questions about the Veterans Choice Program can call the VA Choice Hotline at (800) 465-8262; Julie Drake, chief of the VA Business Office, at (866) 606-8198; or Mr. Welch at (505) 256-2889.

New Mexico Workforce Connection Veterans' Program

Dale Allenberg, veterans' representative, New Mexico Workforce Connection, reported on Workforce Solutions Department (WSD) programs based in Clovis that serve veterans in southeast New Mexico, as well as a private organization that is working to house homeless veterans in the area.

With both state and federal funding, the Clovis Workforce Connection Office conducts outreach and hosts job fairs at local colleges to help veterans, including those with disabilities, find employment. The office also provides help with job searches and résumé preparation and, if necessary, assists veterans in finding housing, food and medical care.

Housing for homeless veterans is a critical need in Clovis. The area's homeless shelter has a three-day stay limit, and housing available through a Goodwill program has a waiting list. To address the problem, Mr. Allenberg has formed a nonprofit entity to build a 22-room facility to house otherwise homeless veterans, with VA health services available on-site. The nonprofit is still awaiting its federal 501(c)(3) designation but is otherwise ready to break ground for the facility. A subsequent phase of the project includes construction of apartments for veterans on land that has been donated to the organization.

On questioning, Mr. Allenberg and committee members noted that:

- (1) there are 18 unemployed veterans on the New Mexico Workforce Connection caseload in the Clovis area, ranging from 24 years old to 80 years old;
- (2) WSD administers the "work keys" test to determine reemployment readiness in three categories: reading for information, locating information and mathematical skills; and
- (3) one challenge for veterans who hold commercial driver's licenses can be to convince insurance companies to give credit for their military experience as truck drivers.

Announcement

Representative Dines announced that Jim Quick will appear at the committee's November 18 meeting to explain the Folds of Honor scholarship program.

Tour of Cannon Air Force Base

Committee members and staff toured Cannon Air Force Base and received a mission briefing from Colonel Benjamin R. Maitre, commander of the 27th Special Operations Wing.

Adjournment

The committee adjourned at 4:15 p.m.